The Semaphore

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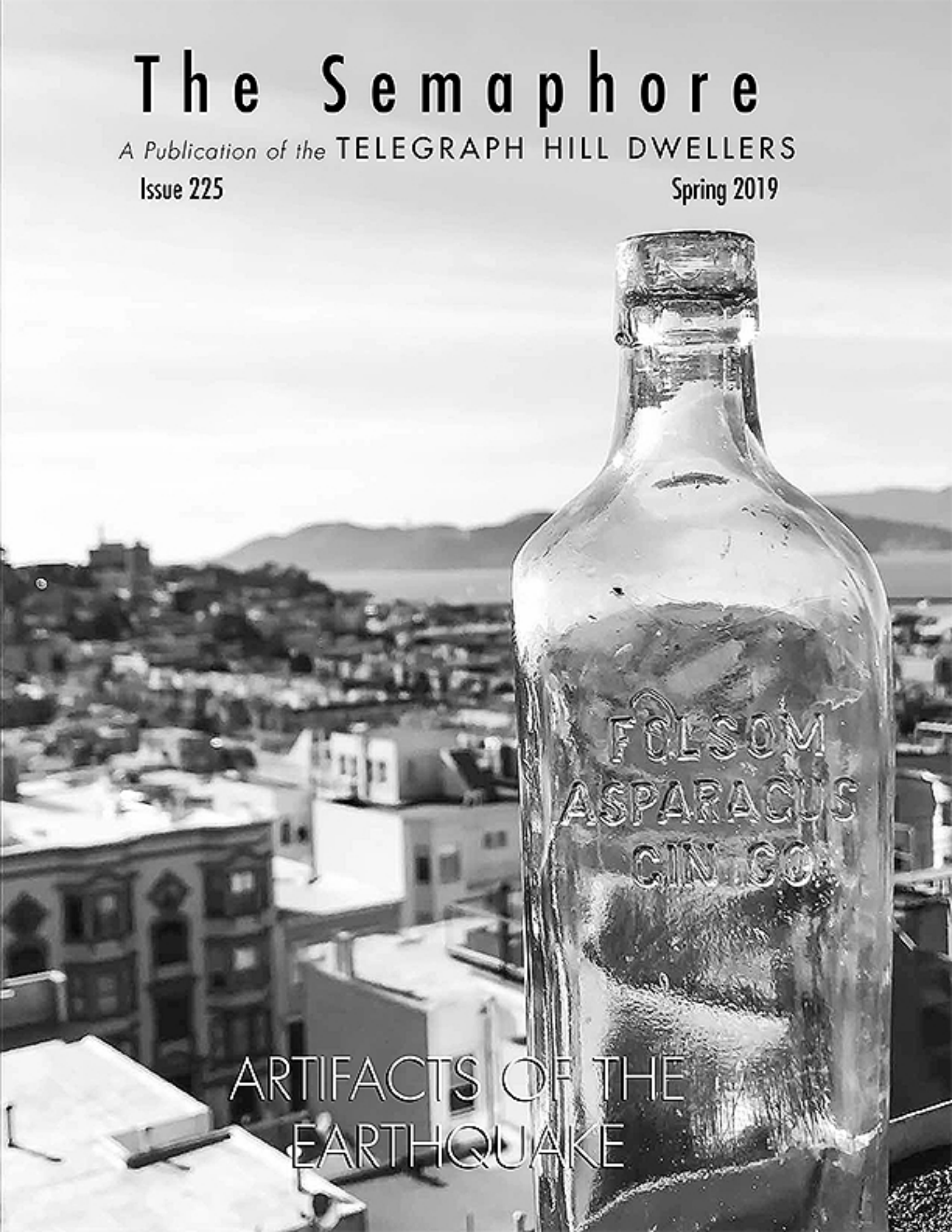

ARTIFACTS OF THE EARTHQUAKE

CHINATOWN: A DRAMATIC JOURNEY

PART THREE OF A THREE-PART SERIES

by Howard Wong, AIA

Chinatown Could Easily Have Disappeared

Many Chinatowns in the U.S. have waned or vanished for social and economic reasons. Marysville, the lone survivor of Chinatowns in the Gold Country, was once the second largest Chinatown in California. But it never recovered from the violent expulsion of its residents in 1886. Urban Chinatowns today, such as in Manhattan and Boston, are battling escalating land values and encroaching financial districts. Yet, Locke, California is one of few Chinatowns protected as a designated Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places and as a National Historic Landmark.

In San Francisco, early Chinese pioneers were resilient and stalwart in preserving their community. Warding off powerful economic forces, Chinese-Americans organized, garnered support from trading partners in China, emphasized Chinatown's tourism strengths and revenue-generating potential, and reinvented the neighborhood as a new Oriental City of exotic culture and "veritable fairy palaces." Chinatown's preservation is as much a testament to a civil-rights struggle as to perseverance and cultural strength.

Grant Street gate to Chinatown.

PHOTOS: CHRIS CARLSSON

Chinatown Gradually Being Nibbled Away

San Francisco's Chinatown remains a cultural hub for Chinese Americans, a gateway for recent immigrants, a regional tourist attraction, a marketplace, a generator of diverse small businesses, a link to community services, and a hospitable home to Chinese-Americans, particularly seniors and foreign-born families. But gradually, over time, nearly imperceptible because of its slow progression, Chinatown's uniqueness and history are vanishing. Chinatown's distinguishing architecture and "exotic" impact are being supplanted by a rush to modernization and clichéd commercialism.

For its time, Chinatown's forbears created infrastructure of relatively high quality, difficult to replicate today. Incrementally over decades, a unique, cohesive imagery was constructed: Portsmouth Square, Old St. Mary's Church, St. Mary's Square, Sing Chong Bazaar, Sing Fat Bazaar, Chinatown YWCA/YMCA, Cameron House, Tien Hou Temple, Old Chinese Hospital, Great Star Theatre, Nam Kue Chinese School, Chinatown Telephone Exchange Building, Chinese Six Companies, Benevolent Associations, and a myriad of contributing architecture. Gone are historic memories spanning decades, among them: movie marquees, neon lights, original storefronts, signage, brick-paved streets, and significant textures/fabric.

Ultimately, Chinatown will look no different than other so-called "Chinatowns," especially if stripped of its historicism. With shifting demographics and competing Asian marketplaces, Chinatown will have fewer attracting qualities.

Hop Sing Tong over the Utopia Cafe.

The same threatening economic forces of 1906 exist today. Large developments and subway projects inexorably exacerbate land values, land uses, zoning changes, property sales, and massive transformations. Rising rents and market-rate housing have already displaced Chinese families from the sloped hills west

Portsmouth Square.

of Chinatown, diminishing the customer base of traditional businesses. Without the legal protections of a Historic District, the symbolic heartbeat of Chinese in America may well alter beyond recognition.

Honoring Chinatown's History

Chinatown is a thriving Chinese community and a living historical testament, honoring 170 years of Chinese in America. Moreover, Chinatown's history is a means for its survival and vibrancy. Throughout the world, people have an instinctive fondness for historical sites. Look, e.g., at historic districts of Beijing, Paris, Dubrovnik, Prague, Boston, or most any major ancient city in the world. Historicism is a people magnet and an economic engine. Historical "authenticity" of a given time and place is a worthy goal and can protect Chinatown for posterity.

Final Memories

For many decades, Chinatown's Grant Avenue was a dynamic hub of the American-Chinese community. People came from afar to replenish their stocks of unique Chinese foods and goods. The hustle and bustle, sights and sounds of Chinese commerce and community interaction mixed with live chickens, ducks, rabbits, and fish tanks in windows along crowded sidewalks. Chinatown was a village. To an outsider and visitor, Chinatown displayed a cultural authenticity.

Over time, that village dispersed to Stockton Street, Clement Street, Irving Street and further afield as acculturation and opportunities expanded. But the historical symbolism of Grant Avenue and its environs remains. It needs to be preserved.

A renewed historic preservation would bring a timely focus, energizing the traditional north-south axis of Chinatown and old San Francisco. Chinatown is the hub linking Downtown, the Financial District, the Broadway Corridor, North Beach, Nob Hill, Russian Hill and the waterfront. The neighborhood is a regional destination magnet and crossroads, the success of which can rouse nearby community and historical revitalization. We need a form of catalytic renewal and urban design. We also need a long-range vision emphasizing sound principles of urban design and planning. When funding and opportunities are limited, design options need to be prioritized to maximize the best catalytic ripple effects on future neighborhood patterns.

San Francisco's Chinatown, America's first Chinatown encompassing the largest Chinese population outside of Asia, was founded by descendants from China's Pearl River Delta. In 1848, at the start of the Gold Rush and the birth of the City of San Francisco, the first 780 Chinese immigrants began a journey that has continued to the present day. The spirit of that cultural journey and interchange must be institutionalized in the architectural and urban design icons that we leave.

Chinatown's historic architecture.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

by Judy Irving
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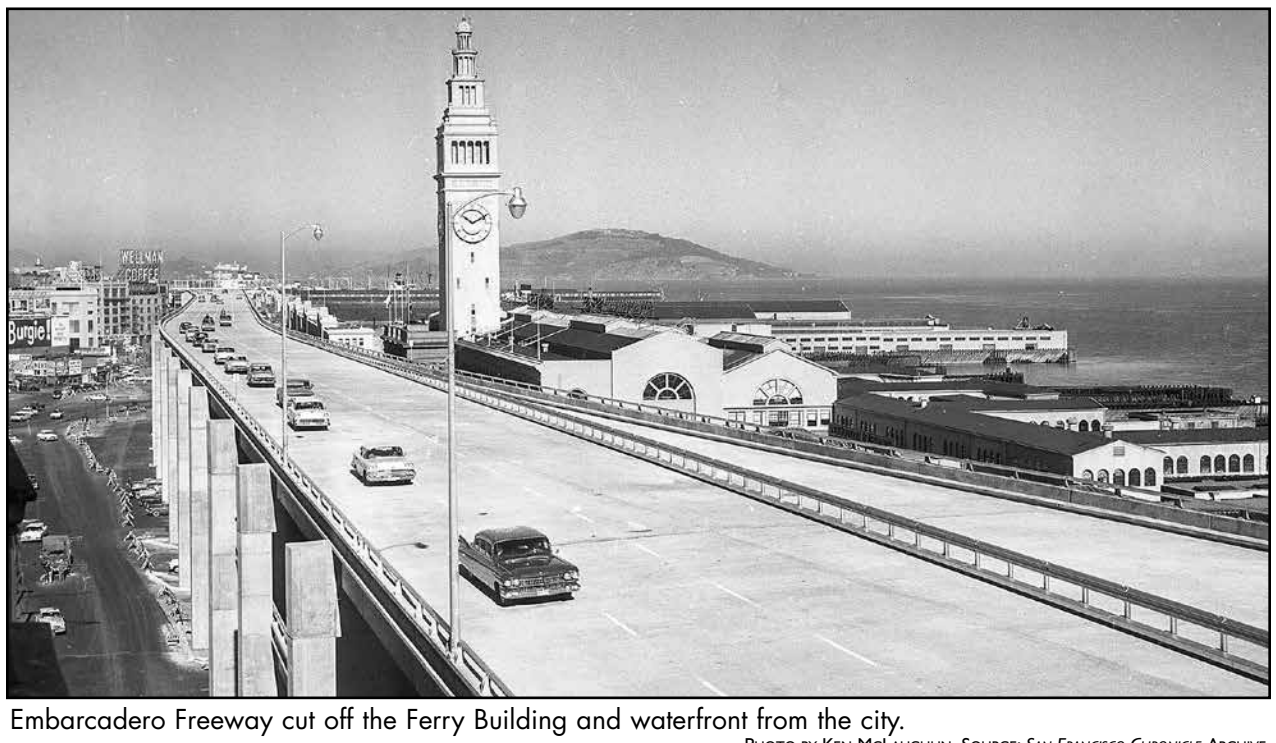


Embarcadero Freeway cut off the Ferry Building and waterfront from the city.
Photo by Ken McLaughlin. Source: *San Francisco Chronicle* Archive.

Who knew that driving a car could result in sea level rise? Or that renting out rooms could contribute to a massive shortage of affordable apartments? Not all unintended consequences are negative, but they're all surprising.

Environmental Consequences

In the fall of 2002, my husband Mark Bittner was riding his bicycle along Battery Street past Levi's Plaza when he saw a woman put a cardboard box over something on the ground. He felt certain it was a parrot. He was right. The bird was in very bad shape: He couldn't hold his head up—it swung around in a figure-eight—and he couldn't stand. The woman had just called Animal Care and Control and was told that someone would come soon to pick up the sick bird. Mark had seen this kind of neurological damage in other members of the wild flock and was afraid this one would die if the City took him in. So Mark carried his bike up the Greenwich Steps, brought a cage back down, and adopted "Parker" before the ACC arrived on scene.

For many years, Mark was told that the source of the parrots' neurological problems was a virus. Later it was determined—erroneously—that the birds were infected by a parasite that came from raccoon feces. Finally, this past March, researchers at the University of Georgia released the results of a multi-year scientific study that implicates bromethalin, aka rat poison, as the real culprit. The study by the university's Infectious Diseases Laboratory was funded by Mickaboo Companion Bird Rescue, a nonprofit group that cares for sick and injured parrots from the wild San Francisco flock.

Parker does a high two-step walk instead of waddling like most parrots. © Judy Irving

Who knew that spreading a few pellets around to kill some rats would poison the parrots, too? Bromethalin affects many "non-target" animals, including coyotes, hawks, owls, raccoons, other birds, and household pets. It is fast-acting and often lethal, difficult to detect in living animals. Like Parker, the wild parrots in the study exhibited "persistent neurologic deficits, including paresis (muscular weakness) and ataxia (an inability to coordinate voluntary muscular movements)." (University of Georgia online newspaper, *UGA Today*)

We've been caring for Parker and another parrot who sustained eye damage from colliding with a glass wind-screen on a rooftop deck for 17 years now. Parker's gotten a lot better, but he can't fly right; he helicopters, then crashes. And he stumbles when he walks. But he is a smart, endearing guru of a bird. I just wish he could have remained healthy out in the wild.

Small house dwarfed by upzoning in Seattle.
Source: AP photo in *Seattle Times*.

If you have rat poison in your closet, please dispose of it as you would any toxic substance (not in the garbage). If our local coyotes haven't already solved your rat problem, check out the online site, R.A.T.S. *www.raptorsarethesolution.org*—"Raptors Are The Solution."

Political Consequences

Unintended consequences play out in politics as well as in the environment. A proposed bill by Scott Wiener (SB 50) sounds OK at first glance – increased housing height and density near transit hubs—but, on closer inspection, SB 50 would destroy what we love about San Francisco. Sound familiar?

We need affordable housing; on that everyone agrees. But creating financial incentives to demolish our existing housing, the greatest stock of rental units in this rent-controlled city, is not the way to create it. We already have the housing. We don't have the political will to make it available. What if all of the Airbnb apartments that have been withdrawn from the city's rental market and transformed into mini-hotels were rented instead to long-term tenants? What if all the apartments held empty for years by speculators had people living in them? These empty and often illegally-rented apartments are already built, already here, but it's more politically expedient to reward developers who fund campaigns.

SB 50 sanctions the demolition of our existing housing stock and the destruction of long-established neighborhoods; fails to adequately protect tenants from eviction; fails to protect historic buildings and historic districts; and fails to address the massive infrastructure upgrades that such a transformation would require. It's very similar to the bill Wiener proposed last year. Local control of San Francisco's development decisions would be taken over by the State, allowing our unique neighborhoods to morph into the bland, multi-story, same-size-fits-all architecture of today. Who exactly is Wiener representing in Sacramento?

Good Consequences

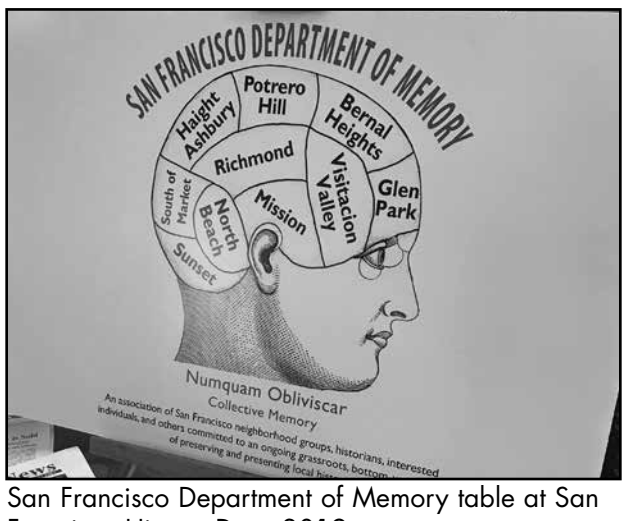
Not all unintended consequences are "bad." Who knew that the Loma Prieta earthquake would result in the revitalization of our waterfront? It took more than a nudge from Mother Nature to reconnect the City by the Bay to the Bay, though. Former Mayor Art Agnos did the right thing by demolishing the badly damaged Embarcadero Freeway, despite fierce protests from Chinatown. His decision was not politically expedient, and he lost his re-election bid. But what he gave us was priceless: a whole new life for the Ferry Building, an expanded Bayside Exploratorium, and an open, welcoming Embarcadero that seamlessly connects the waterfront to downtown.

At our annual meeting in late April, Mayor Agnos spoke about those momentous decisions he made 30 years ago and suggested how the current city administration could move forward, whether it's politically expedient or not. A tall order. But why not demand ethical and wise decisions from our elected officials? The theme of his talk—"How Big Should San Francisco Become?"—ties in perfectly with the debate over SB 50.

Finally, who knew that a small but vocal group of Telegraph Hill residents who fought to save a bus line would morph into one of the oldest, largest, and most respected community organizations in the country? THD is celebrating its 65th anniversary this year (1954-2019), and we're planning a picnic at Coit Tower's south lawn in the Fall, accessible by that same bus line, the Coit 39! Save the date: October 6th. Details to come.

The Semaphore, our quarterly, has evolved along with THD into an invaluable ongoing history of the Hill, and now our archives are being digitized to be included in the San Francisco Department of Memory's Neighborhood Newspapers of San Francisco collection at the Internet Archive. Each issue is being scanned so it is text-searchable and freely available to anyone. LisaRuth Elliott, project director of the collection, heads up the effort that has digitally archived more than 1,650 issues of neighborhood newspapers, offering an in-depth, online, locally-driven version of how events transpired, which often differs substantially from commercial newspaper accounts. Papers include the *Visitacion Valley Grapevine*, *Tenderloin Times*, and the *Potrero View*.

"It is exciting to read through the issues of the *Telegraph Hill Semaphore* in the 1970s and 1980s which we are digitizing now," LisaRuth wrote, "and see the steadfast engagement of North Beach and Telegraph Hill residents to keep their neighborhood livable in the face of encroachment of tourism and urban threats of greedy development, redevelopment, and increasing economic pressures. With historic preservation and open space and height limits as precedents, the paper reads as a 'how to' of neighborhood activism that groups today can learn a lot from."



San Francisco Department of Memory table at San Francisco History Days 2019. © LisaRuth Elliott

We don't often lobby for what's politically expedient, and we get push-back from developers and corporate media because our positions threaten their ability to make huge profits. If we didn't create this backlash, I'd worry that we were doing something wrong.

Onward! Welcome new board members and new officers! We have much work to do. It's been a privilege to be at the helm of this organization for the past two years.

SOCIAL & PROGRAM REPORT

by Bob Berryman, Committee Chair
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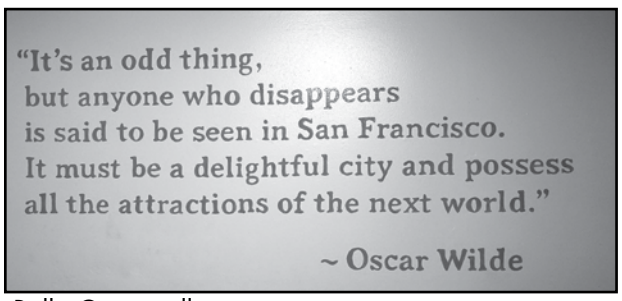
Great wine, delicious beer, and live jazz contributed to a fun winter event attended by many THD members at Belle Cora on February 19. Friends and neighbors gathered to share stories of themselves and The Hill as they listened to the Jose Simioni Jazz Duet play crisp tunes in a casual, North Beach setting.



Belle Cora wall quote. © Bob Berryman

WINTER SOCIAL AND JAZZ

Belle Cora winter social. © Bob Berryman

Fun and Games Department item from a "Tellygraff Hill" resident. Source: *SF Chronicle*.

Congratulations to our former THD president, Vedica Puri, who was appointed Judge of the Superior Court of San Francisco by Governor Jerry Brown. Vedica is the first Indian-American to hold such a position. Way to go!

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DISTRICT 3 SUPERVISOR REPORT

SPRING IS SPRUNG, AND THE WORK CONTINUES!

by District 3 Supervisor Aaron Peskin
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Housing Loss:

Judy Irving touched on the topic of vacancies and housing this month, and the continued loss of affordable housing in San Francisco remains a top concern for my office. In the midst of San Francisco's ongoing housing and affordability crisis, the City's 2018 Housing Balance Report revealed a startling fact: For every two units of housing built in San Francisco over the last decade, one affordable or rent-controlled home has been lost to demolition or speculative eviction. These are homes that used to house friends, neighbors, and the city's workforce, many of whom have been pushed outside of San Francisco. In total, more than 4,200 affordable and rent-controlled homes have been taken off the market over the past 10 years. While this is a troubling number on its own—particularly in terms of the adverse effect on San Francisco's most-vulnerable and economically-diverse communities—that number doesn't even include the unknown loss of housing that is neither rent-controlled nor deed-restricted nor the impact of grotesque "mega-mansion" expansions on citywide housing affordability overall. Then there is the blatant permit abuse that has enabled speculative developers to demolish unique historic housing under the guise of "kitchen sink remodels," only to get a slap on the wrist after-the-fact for breaking the law.

Protect & Preserve:

Enough is enough! After a year-long research and drafting process, I will be bringing my Protect & Preserve Act to the Board of Supervisors for adoption, with the support of a broad citywide coalition of community-based organizations, tenant groups, and neighborhood associations. The legislation would stem the loss of affordable and rent-controlled housing by a) clarifying and conforming San Francisco's three conflicting definitions of "Demolition" to ensure proper enforcement; b) increasing penalties for the illegal demolition of housing; and c) placing reasonable limits on single-family home expansions that don't result in multi-unit apartment buildings. I want to thank the Telegraph Hill Dwellers for input, as well as the Russian Hill Neighborhood Association, Middle Polk Neighborhood Association, Chinatown Community Development Association, and Lower Polk Neighbors.

Addressing Vacancies:

Then there is the issue of vacancies, which has long been a concern plaguing our housing and commercial storefront markets. The Office of Short-Term Rentals (STR) recently reported that with 40 percent of short-term rental applications found to be fraudulent or non-compliant, most property owners are now turning to 30+ day corporate rentals, which have seen a spike on Airbnb. Working with the City Attorney's Office and tenant groups, I will be introducing legislation to prioritize "housing for humans," not corporations holding rent-controlled units off the market for tourist crash-pads as a way to skirt local STR regulations.

Finally, a recent study conducted jointly by the Telegraph Hill Dwellers, North Beach Business Association, and North Beach Neighbors revealed that 21 percent of existing North Beach commercial vacancies are being perpetrated by just two property owners, who not only pushed out pre-existing neighborhood small businesses but let the properties sit vacant for years. This kind of "bad actor" behavior is playing out in neighborhood commercial corridors across the City, as property owners increase rents in a bid to extract well over market-rate fair returns. Beloved family-run corner store S&S Grocery, one of two neighborhood groceries, just received notice from the landlord that he wants more than double the existing rent and *only* under a short-term lease option. I receive pleas from neighborhood businesses every day, asking for help and support to negotiate reasonable lease terms with their landlords. Ultimately, after these thriving small businesses are pushed out, the storefronts end up vacant while absentee landlords sit on the properties, hoping to land bigger fish. The Haight Ashbury Merchants Association and merchants in Chinatown have also echoed these struggles.

I am proposing a narrowly-tailored Commercial Vacancy Tax for the November ballot that will impose a blight tax on "bad actors" and absentee landlords who are gutting our neighborhood commercial districts in some of the City's most iconic neighborhoods—and deliberately displacing legacy businesses citywide. The dedicated tax revenue would go to the Small Business Construction Mitigation Fund, which I recently established as a part of early City budget negotiations, to address impacts to small businesses from large capital infrastructure construction projects (like the delayed Central Subway and Van Ness BRT projects). Through this commercial vacancy tax, the Fund would be expanded to provide relief for small businesses displaced or impacted by mandatory soft-story retrofits, another top reason for commercial vacancies per the North Beach study.

The city has legislated significant incentives for property owners, including funding for programs like SF Shines and the Legacy Business Program (with incentives for property owners as well as for small business tenants). And it's important to have disincentives for bad behavior, as well. Our small businesses are the lifeblood of our neighborhoods, and everyone has to work together to keep them vibrant.

North Beach Birthday Boy:

Last month I was able to wish Lawrence Ferlinghetti "buon compleanno!" with a special olive tree planting in his honor, as well as a Proclamation dedicating March 24, 2019 "Ferlinghetti Day" in San Francisco. I thanked him for his heartfelt support for the North Beach formula retail controls as well as for his dedication to keeping North Beach funky, artistic, and community-oriented. I still have his 2005 letter of support for that small business legislation hanging in my North Beach office. Thank you to everyone who helps to keep North Beach alive with community and supports our small businesses—like local artist Jeremy Fish, who gave out 100 art prints with three proofs of purchase from any North Beach local business last month. That is community love!

See you around the neighborhood,
Aaron

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PLANNING & ZONING REPORT

by Stan Hayes, Committee Chair
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Telegraph Hill, North Beach, and the Northeast Waterfront – this wonderful place that so many call home (whether they actually live here or not). A place that embraces some of the most charming and historic parts of San Francisco's legendary heart. Far from being NIMBYs on the Hill (as sometimes mistakenly alleged), we're Stewards of the Hill. Not just for those of us who live here but for everyone, everywhere who loves this special place.

That's why preserving and protecting the Hill and areas around it loom so large in our mission statement. That's why we write letters, send emails, go to meetings, and speak to so many City leaders. Again and again: to the Board of Supervisors, the Planning Commission, the Historic Preservation Commission, and many others.

We do our best, but sometimes that's not enough. Sometimes we lose. But, sometimes we win. Working together with others who share our views. And, on the best of occasions, working together with the City itself. Here are two stories that help make it all worthwhile, illustrating the positive effects of THD efforts.

120 Varennes. This project proposed to construct on the east side of Telegraph Hill a new rooftop addition to an existing three story, two-unit residential building, along with extensive interior remodeling. Seems routine enough, right? The City thought so, with the Department of Building Inspection poised to issue building permits. Until, at the 11th hour on the last day for appeal of those permits, neighbors, supported by THD, the Chinatown Community Development Corporation (CCDC), the Community Tenants Association (CTA), and others, filed a request for discretionary review by the Planning Commission.

Here's the backstory. And, how many times have we seen this? Rent-controlled, affordable housing lost to market-rate luxury condos with landlords displacing lower-income tenants, knowing an unoccupied unit commands a much higher sales price? Forcing out, in the case of this project, long-term tenants who had lived there for 31 years, starting in 1986. Two members of a rent-ordinance- protected class—both seniors, who, with two relatives, were a multigenerational family. Displaced, no record of a buyout at the Rent Board, with the buyout laws circumvented. A family coerced to leave "voluntarily," facing a long and uncertain construction period and threatened with eviction.

809 Montgomery (Jackson Square Law Offices) © Stewart Morton

In the event you failed to vacate the Premises after payment of the first half of the required relocation money and after the required 60-day notice period stated in the eviction notice expired, my client would have no choice but to file an eviction lawsuit against you in order to regain possession of the Premises. An eviction lawsuit on your record can make it more difficult for you to obtain future rental housing and may also adversely affect your credit rating.

Eviction paragraph in letter from law firm representing 120 Varennes building owner. © David Lipkin

120 Varennes © Stan Hayes

Built in 1904 and a Class A contributory historic resource to the Upper Grant Historic District, this building was proposed to have major alterations so substantive as to threaten a near de facto demolition, with expansions upward through the roof to a new living room addition and downward to a new garage-level master bedroom suite. And, all this with a history of attempted serial over-the-counter permitting and resulting suspension of the building-permit application for erroneous approvals at one point.

Planning staff opposed the discretionary review and recommended that the Planning Commission not take the review, thereby approving the project. However, neighbors, supported by THD, CCDC, CTA, and others, fought successfully to prove and then tell the backstory to the Planning Commission. A well-deserved thanks to all, especially CCDC, which provided a copy of a "smoking gun" letter from the project proponent's attorney to the tenants demanding that they leave the premises for "at least 9 months" and threatening them, if they resisted, with an eviction lawsuit that "can make it more difficult for you to obtain future rental housing and may also adversely affect your credit rating."

Counter to planning staff recommendations, the Planning Commission decided to take discretionary review and voted 6-0 to disapprove the project. And, in the process, it sent a powerful message to others who would seek to use similar tactics elsewhere.

809 Montgomery. This project proposed to add a one-floor vertical addition and a roof deck on this Class A contributory historic building in the Jackson Square Historic District. Last fall, project proponents presented the project design to a meeting of the THD Planning & Zoning Committee. Following the meeting, THD sent a letter stating the Committee's comments and offering to work with the proponents to "maintain the historic character of Jackson Square and the contributing status of 809 Montgomery Street."

In March, project proponents returned to the Planning & Zoning Committee to present a modified project design that responded to the previous concerns. Consistent with those comments, the proposed third-floor addition was reduced in height, a number of more historically consistent changes were made, and neighbors were consulted further and the wall facing them covered with vegetation.

As a result of the project proponents' responsiveness to THD's concerns, THD prepared a letter supporting the modified project and proponents' efforts to obtain approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) from the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). THD also offered testimony in support of the project at the HPC hearing. The Commission voted 6-0 in favor of a COA for the project.

To us, this is how the process is supposed to work.

As always: To join, or to get information from, the THD Planning & Zoning Committee, just send an email to *hello@thd.org* or *Stan.Hayes@thd.org*.

FROM THE EDITOR

MY NEIGHBOR, LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

by Cap Caplan
cap.caplan@thd.org

My neighbor, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, turned 100 last month. It was a momentous day around the globe, with special events, international press coverage, and non-stop phone calls, text messages, and social media communications.

Here in San Francisco, the City proclaimed March 24 as "Lawrence Ferlinghetti Day." Fans crowded into City Lights Booksellers and Publishers ("pound for pound the best bookstore in America" per the *New York Times*), co-founded by Ferlinghetti in 1953, where they celebrated with bubbly, goodie bags of Ferlinghettiana, poetry readings, and brisk sales of commemorative T-shirts and Ferlinghetti's newly-released autobiographical novel, *Little Boy*.

Celebrations were held as well at galleries showing photographs of Ferlinghetti, some never published, and displaying his paintings. And on Via Ferlinghetti, an olive tree was planted in his honor.

Another milestone, however, passed without fanfare. It's a minor footnote in the arc of this remarkable man's life but one worth recording.

For two weeks last month, a red truck was parked across the street. In the driver's window was a "For Sale" sign.

No ordinary truck, this was Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 1995 Ford Ranger Pickup. And I had been watching him drive that truck on many days—backing it out of the garage and, later, driving it back in—during the 30 years I've lived across the street.

On those days when he was leaving and I was outside, he'd often back up and stop to admire my dog (first Biscuit, then Guinevere, then Dudley, and now Ace). And murmur words of praise.

There are many Ferlinghettis. Entrepeneur. Social activist. Writer and painter. Publisher and defender of the Beats. And, for his lookalike son, Lorenzo Ferlinghetti, the father taking him to Candlestick Park, where they climbed up into the bleachers, sitting among a rowdy crowd and "whooping it up" for the Giants. The father also driving them in the red truck to Big Sur and their cabin below the Bixby Bridge. "My chore," Lorenzo recalls, "was to chop wood every day we were there."

In the neighborhood, Mr. Ferlinghetti has lived quietly, not one to sit on the stoop or stroll the block. So, for me, he and the red truck are so intertwined, it's hard to think of one without the other.

The truck was sold. The lucky buyer was Chris Buck, an urban forester with the Department of Public Works, an aspiring poet himself and HUGE fan of Ferlinghetti, whom he had never met. He holds a Ferlinghetti celebration in North Beach every year.

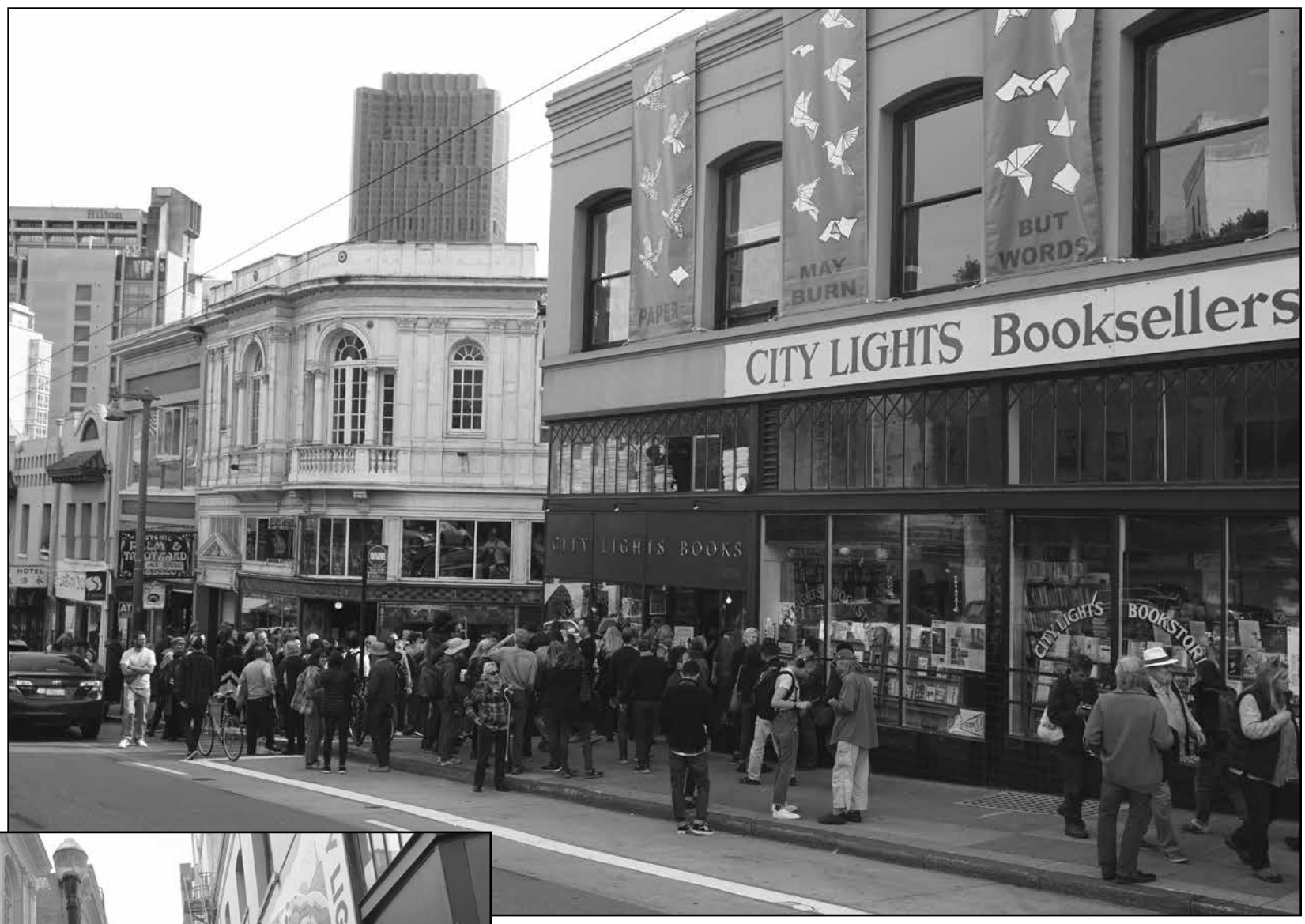
Chris Buck (l) on the day he bought Lawrence Ferlinghetti's red truck. © George Schumm

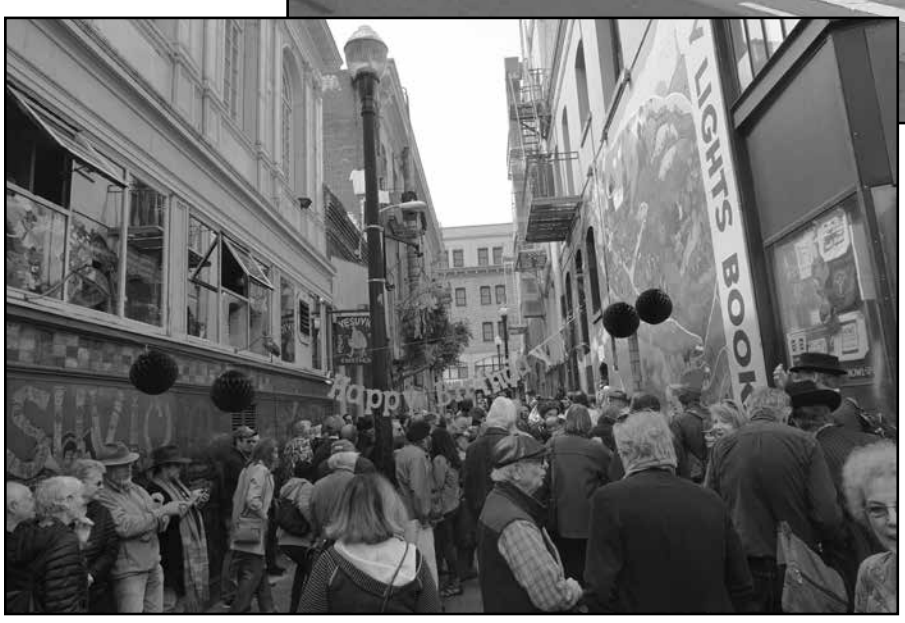
Buck even came back to help plant an olive tree in front of Ferlinghetti's home in lieu of the ficus the City had recently cut down (and hadn't planned to replace). Ferlinghetti came out to thank him.

It's my understanding that it's going to be a working truck, as it's always been but kept in as original condition as possible and made available for public occasions.

I feel nostalgic and a little sad as I write. At the same time, I'm so glad my neighbor is also writing away (vigorously, I'm told) across the street.

NORTH BEACH CELEBRATES FERLINGHETTI'S 100TH BIRTHDAY!





PHOTOS © Howard Wong, AIA

FOLSOM ASPARAGUS GIN

by George Schumm

A seismic retrofit is about as welcome as a root canal. However, work underway at the corner of Powell and Chestnut, site of recently departed Citizen Chain bicycle shop, did offer up a small recompense. John Reed, a friend and tenant of the owner of the property, reported to THD the discovery of three intact bottles, one embossed FOLSOM / ASPARAGUS / GIN CO. Just how they came to be buried under the floor is not entirely clear, although it appears deposit occurred during the installation of a waste line a decade or so after the erection of the structure in 1907. (An upgrade from privy to indoor plumbing, maybe?)

The contractor on the present job, Michael Miranda, tells me it's not uncommon to unearth bottles on this kind of project. And he's broken nary a one due to the careful digging required.

The Folsom Asparagus Gin Company (aka FAG-CO) was in business only from 1916-1918 and located at 350 Clay, phone Sutter 826. For trivia buffs, that's the same address at which North Beach writer Richard Brautigan, author of the poem "The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth's Beer Bottles," worked for Pacific Chemical Laboratories in the late '50s and early '60s preparing doses of powdered barium. Today, alas, the locale sports nothing sexier than a parking garage.

This bottle would have held the company's asparagus gin compound for which US patent 116,512 was issued on May 8, 1917. According to the now-missing labelling, the product contained 30 percent alcohol and was "made with the greatest care" from "the juice of selected Asparagus and Double Stamp Gin." The front label bore the outfit's registered trademark, two brown bears sitting on their haunches hugging a bunch of asparagus spears and superimposed on a blue triangle. This design, in turn, was superimposed on four large spears, giving that label a distinctive shape.

FAG CO Asparagus Gin bottle. Photo courtesy Bonhams (NYC).

I don't know the reason for the venture's short life, though one could make an educated guess. Bloggers who, out of curiosity, have toyed with the concoction are largely in agreement: a hearty asparagus taste with a hint of juniper; a strong, unwelcome finish; a recipe perhaps best forgotten. A far cry, this assessment, from the company's assurance that its version was "very agreeable and pleasant to the taste."

In fairness, FAG-CO was not alone in deeming asparagus gin a winning proposition. The Rothenberg Company, another local firm of the era, also produced one. Nor were these to be the last. The English label Portobello Road launched an asparagus gin as recently as 2015 though admitting it's love it or hate it.

Mere fun old bottle this is not. It stands witness to an early 20th century fashion for vegetal flavored gins. (Anyone for apple? Mint? Maple?)

The artifact recalls also San Francisco's numerous contributions from the second half of the 19th century and early 20th to the tippling arts. The City was the birthplace of cocktails, Pisco Punch, and craft brewing in America with Anchor Brewing Company's iconic steam beer. And, for whatever ails ya, there was Dr. Warren's Yerba Buena Bitters ("the California remedy"), the longest selling bitters on the West Coast. How much more history lies right under our feet?

ART & CULTURE REPORT

by Anna Berryman, Committee Chair
anna.berryman@thd.org

Sicily: A Heart's Journey by Mary Tolaro Noyes

Author Mary Tolaro Noyes introduced her new memoir, *Sicily: A Heart's Journey*, to a large group of Telegraph Hill Dwellers, North Beach residents, and friends and family on April 4 at the Italian Athletic Club.

After a lovely wine reception, Catherine Accardi (former editor of *The Semaphore*) expertly interviewed the author, who shared her dream of finding her Sicilian family and establishing a lasting connection with them. The tale of her emotional journey led many people to wonder aloud about their own ancestry and what their family's particular story might be.

After her presentation, Mary took questions from the audience, mingled with attendees, and signed books.

Author congratulated at launch of her memoir about Sicily. © Dennis Hearne.

Author Mary Tolaro Noyes with a fan. © Dennis Hearne

Good turnout for *Sicily: A Heart's Journey*. © Dennis Hearne

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COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

by Al Fontes, Committee Chair
al.fontes@thd.org

When I joined THD in 1997, Willie was mayor, Gavin was a supervisor, and district elections would soon become a reality. Nearly all communication with THD members occurred through letters and postcards, leaving behind a trail of dead trees and expensive postage stamps. Today, most of that communication has been replaced by email and the THD website.

Historically, ad-hoc groups and individual volunteers have pitched in to maintain the website, manage bulk email, and support online payments via credit card. Now, however, we're taking a more organized approach.

The Board of Directors formally designated the Communications Committee last year. As a Committee, we are focusing on several areas with which we hope to help THD achieve its goals.

Membership Outreach: The Committee provides assistance and advice to the Board of Directors in its efforts to communicate directly with THD members. Most of the work involves managing bulk email or updates to the website, but we help wherever we can. Recently, the Communications Committee coordinated with Social Chair Bob Berryman to help organize and promote a new member welcoming party and a night of poetry at the Beat Museum.

Reference: People should be able to find out what THD does and what motivates its members. We provide access to the bylaws, contact information for board members, and the ability to view archived issues of *The Semaphore*. Members should be able to learn about (and perhaps join) standing committees and contact their respective chairs.

Expanded Reach: In keeping with the times, THD has cautiously dipped its toe into social media. We now have a page on Facebook, *https://fb.com/telegraph.hill.dwellers*. Many people look to social media as a first place to find news and information, and we welcome them into our audience. We monitor all activity on Facebook very closely, as its use is still quite new to our organization. To support fully those not looking to dive into Facebook, announcements for THD events and other important information will always continue to appear on the *www.thd.org* website and in email to the membership. At this point in time, we have decided not to pursue other social media such as Twitter or Instagram, although we do have a presence on LinkedIn.

Website Improvements: The website has had the same basic design for a few years, and it's time for a refresh. The Committee is currently gathering requirements for a new, improved *www.thd.org*. Suggestions and constructive feedback related to the website are welcome.

We invite THD members to join our Committee, which meets once a month. Please contact me, Al Fontes, at al.fontes@thd.org.

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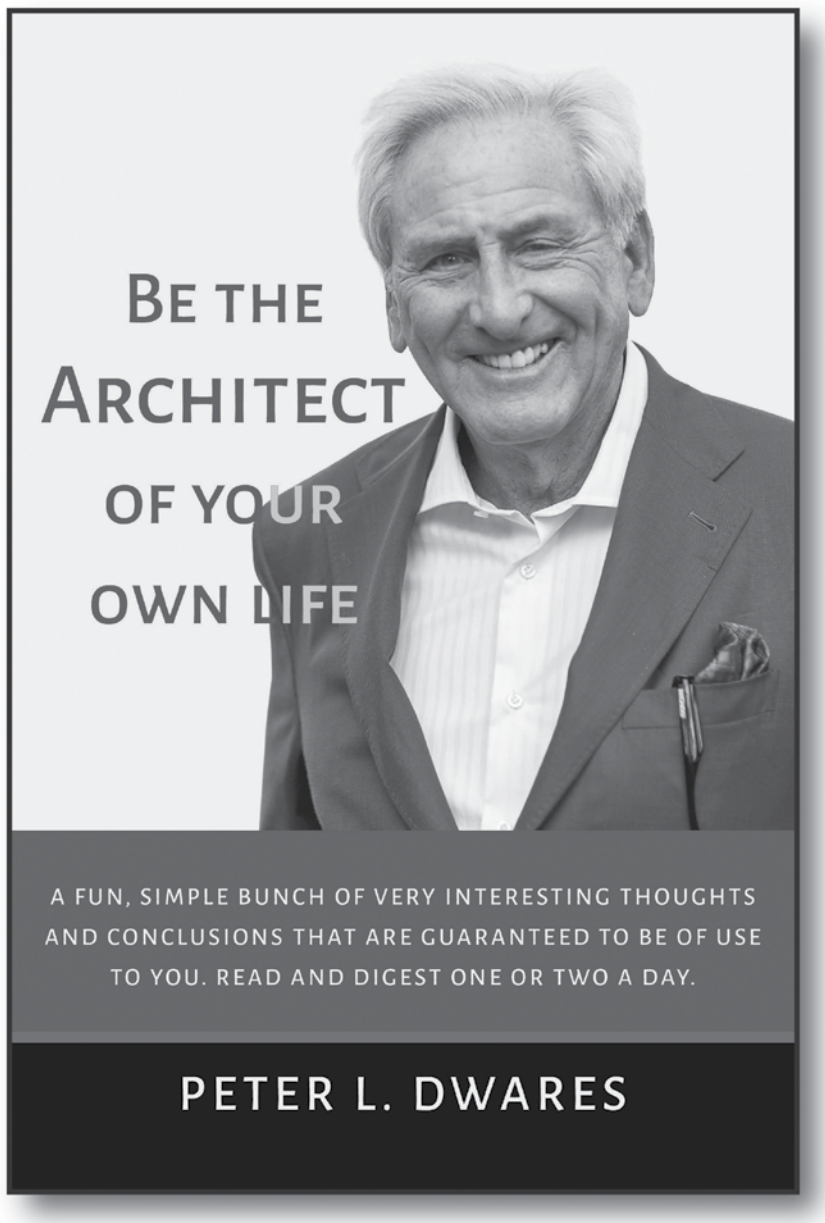

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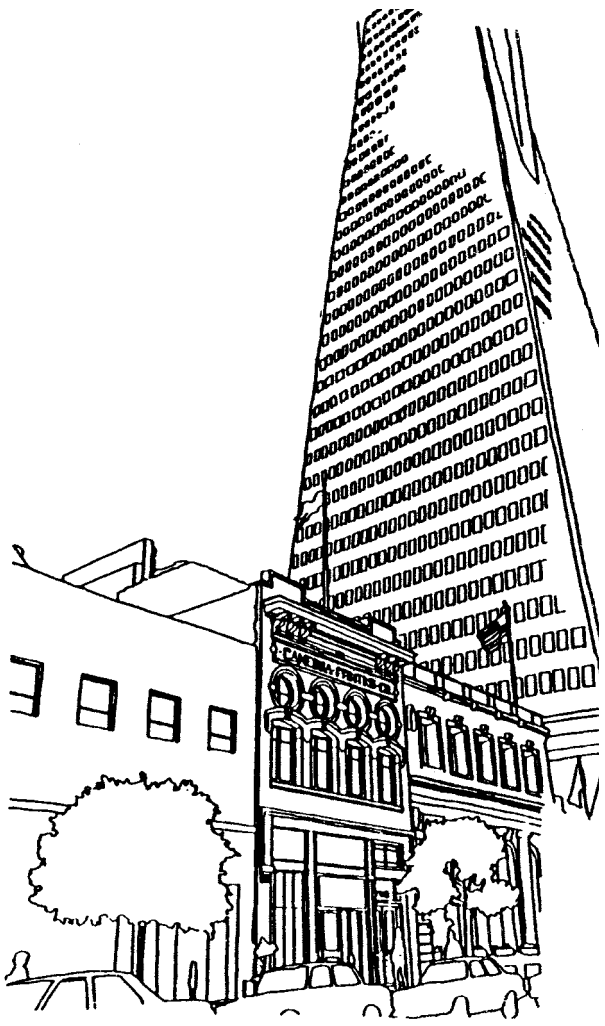

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TRANSPORTATION REPORT

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY, A PRIORITY IN NORTH BEACH

by David Becker, Co-Chair
david.becker@thd.org

Walking in North Beach is a cathartic experience. Beautiful trees, lovely people, stylish buildings, and wonderful restaurants make our neighborhood special. There is much to love about living here, but we should not overlook the opportunities we have to improve pedestrian safety.

Our streets are where we walk, bike, encounter old friends, exercise, clear our minds, and meet our neighbors. Rather than designing streets to maximize the number of cars we can push through (which, as the city grows, will never be enough), we need to reclaim our streets and focus on pedestrian safety.

Pedestrian-vehicle collisions are never an accident. The word "accident" obscures our responsibility in this matter. These are preventable injuries and deaths. We know how to design our streets to prioritize the safety of our neighbors over the timeliness of Ubers.

Take the intersection of Columbus Avenue and Stockton and Green Streets. To cross at this intersection, a pedestrian has to traverse up to three crosswalks. It's no wonder our neighbors sometimes give up on the current design, choosing to take their chances and jaywalk. This intersection is extremely dangerous because there are six sources of vehicle traffic.

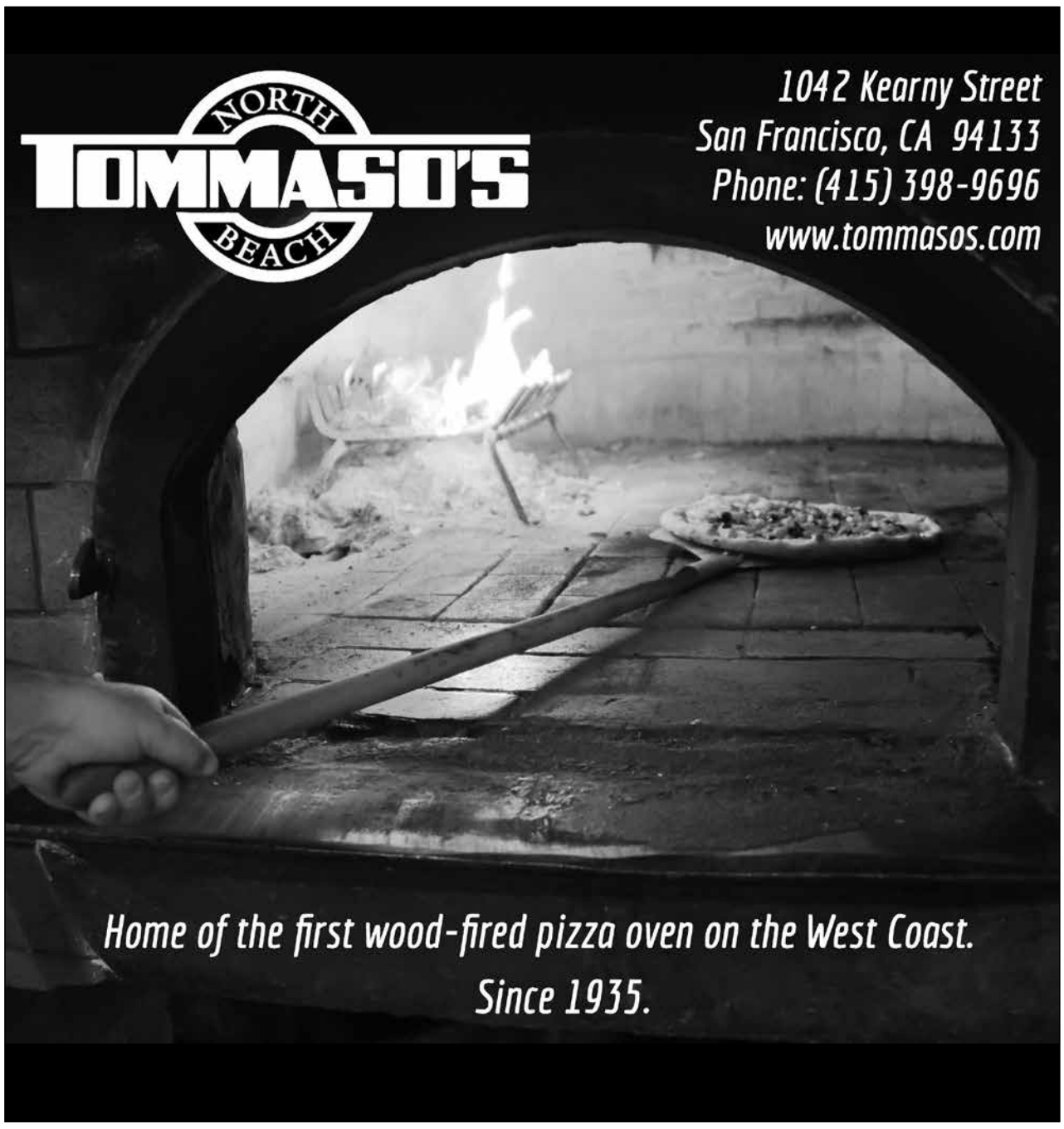
THD and the North Beach Business Association recently wrote to Supervisor Aaron Peskin requesting the installation of a *scramble signal* at this intersection. This signal would stop traffic on all sides and allow pedestrians to cross the intersection directly. Pedestrian scramble signals are not a new idea. They are already widely used in Chinatown and the Financial District. We know installing them would improve safety for all pedestrians and ease the walk for seniors and disabled persons in our community.

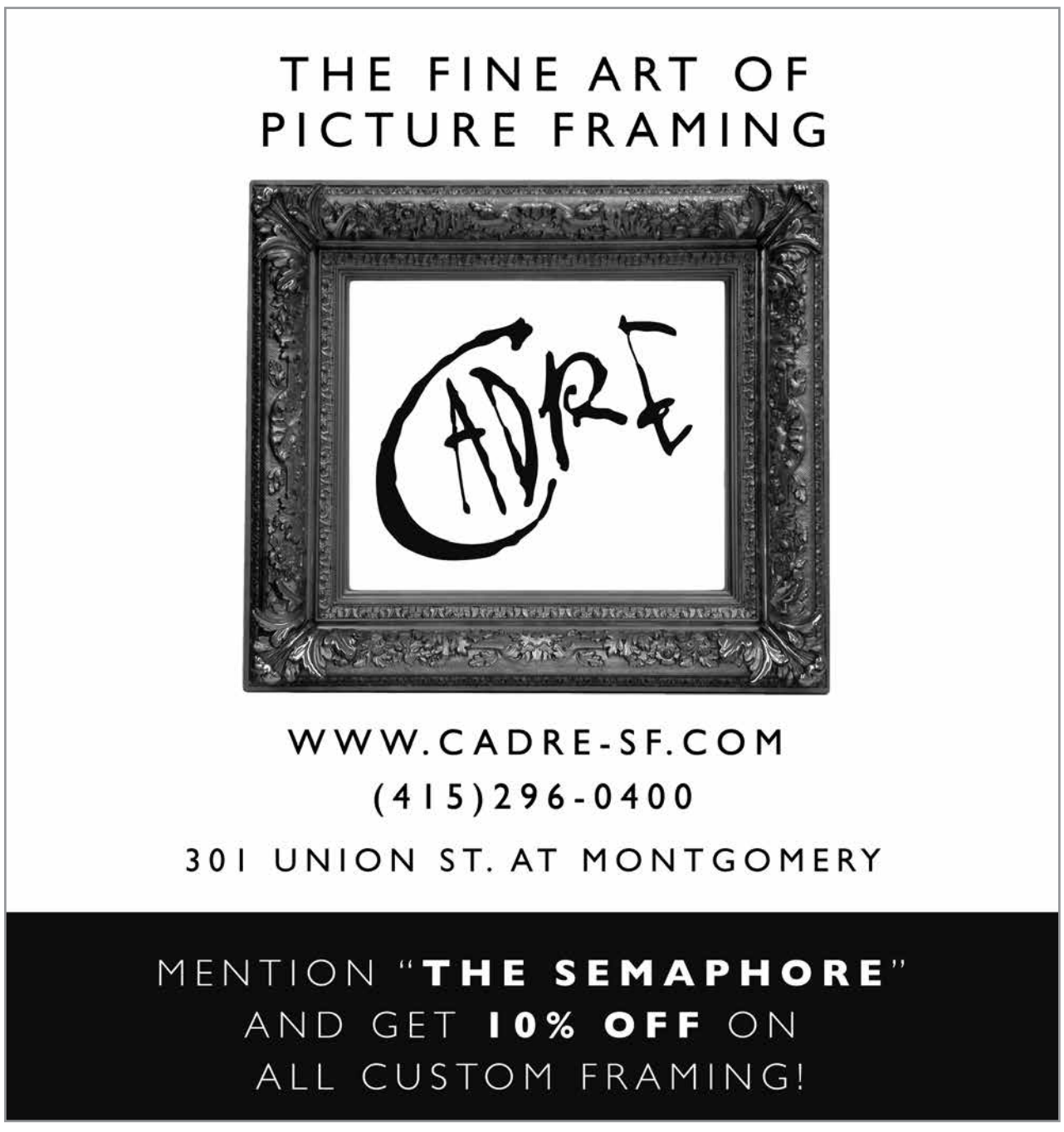
The pedestrian scramble signal is our first step to safer streets in North Beach. Over the following year, the THD Transportation Committee will host the SFMTA, WalkSF, Friends of the Urban Forest, Bike Coalition, and many other groups to discuss and implement projects that protect our pedestrians and cyclists.

We need to be doing our part to make our streets safe. Our neighborhood includes several streets in the high-injury network. As a city, we have already lost five people in 2019 who did nothing but choose to cross a street or ride a bike. A far cry from VisionZero, a goal to lower pedestrian deaths to zero. The SFMTA needs to prioritize all pedestrian safety improvements and move quickly to improve the safety of our streets.

Disabled pedestrian at complicated crossing (Stockton/Green/Columbus). © David Becker

Aerial view of Stockton/Green/Columbus intersection. Source: Google Maps.





PARKS & TREES REPORT

WASHINGTON SQUARE PROJECTS MOVE CLOSER TO IMPLEMENTATION

by Don Raichle, Committee Chair
don.raichle@thd.org

Providing status updates on the multiple projects planned for our local parks has been a challenge! Invariably, what we have learned and shared through *The Semaphore* winds up being out-of-date by publication. This has been frustrating, since these proposed projects will have noticeable near-term construction impacts and result in long-term visual and functional changes to our cherished open spaces. Fortunately, local interest and concern have led many in the neighborhood to become engaged, especially after the tragic loss of the pine grove at Washington Square's playground. While outcomes have not always reflected an optimal result, significant turnout at public meetings and impassioned comment have had measurable impact on the responsiveness of agencies involved.

As of now, there are three major park-related projects in our neighborhood that are either ongoing, scheduled to begin, or anticipating approval in the near future. All of these have been discussed here in the past, and the status of each is as follows.

Pioneer Park Tree Maintenance: A number of trees within the park have been pruned and others, structurally-unsound and overplanted, removed to improve habitat, tree health, and views. This effort was initiated several months ago, and initial results have been promising, although recently the work has slowed. The Recreation and Parks Department (Rec/Park) has committed to a higher level of maintenance; continued monitoring is needed to ensure the work is continuous and executed properly.

Washington Square Irrigation and Drainage Project: The Recreation and Parks Commission recently approved a new contract for this project. The start date has been slipping, but it is likely to be late spring or early summer. Because of public concern about the length of the park closure and its impacts on the neighborhood, incentives have been included in the awarded contract to expedite the construction period to be within six months. Construction will include removal and replacement of poorly-drained soil, installation of a new drainage system and irrigation, and replacement of the existing degraded walkways. The walkways will essentially match the existing alignments but will now be ADA-accessible. Additionally, four trees, assessed as hazardous by an arborist retained by Rec/Park, will be removed and replaced.

Significant controversy has marked this project, but now that it is moving forward, the focus must shift to local vigilance. THD intends to monitor the project's progress closely and work with other neighborhood groups to support the desire of residents and businesses that the work is executed correctly and on time. The Department of Public Works (DPW), which will be managing the work for Rec/Park, cannot allow a fiasco like the lost pine grove at the park's playground to happen again.

Ficus Tree Removal and Replacement on Columbus Avenue: Public Works has proposed to remove and replace all seven Ficus trees along the Columbus Avenue edge of Washington Square. The reason: the trees' lack of structural integrity. While public safety concerns resulting from their poor condition are legitimate, the proposal has raised significant local resistance based on loss of habitat, visual impact, and further neighborhood disruption.

In anticipation of a decision, staff from both Rec/Park and DPW met with members of several neighborhood groups to explain the need for this action. Responses from local representatives ranged from agreement that the trees needed replacement to insistence that they stay. All agreed, however, that if the trees were to be removed, the neighborhood must have input into selection of the new trees' species and size, including that they be as large as possible to hasten filling in for the lost trees.

Subsequently, a hearing on their fate was held, and residents had an opportunity to provide input.

Ficus trees on Columbus Avenue lining Washington Square Park. © Don Raichle

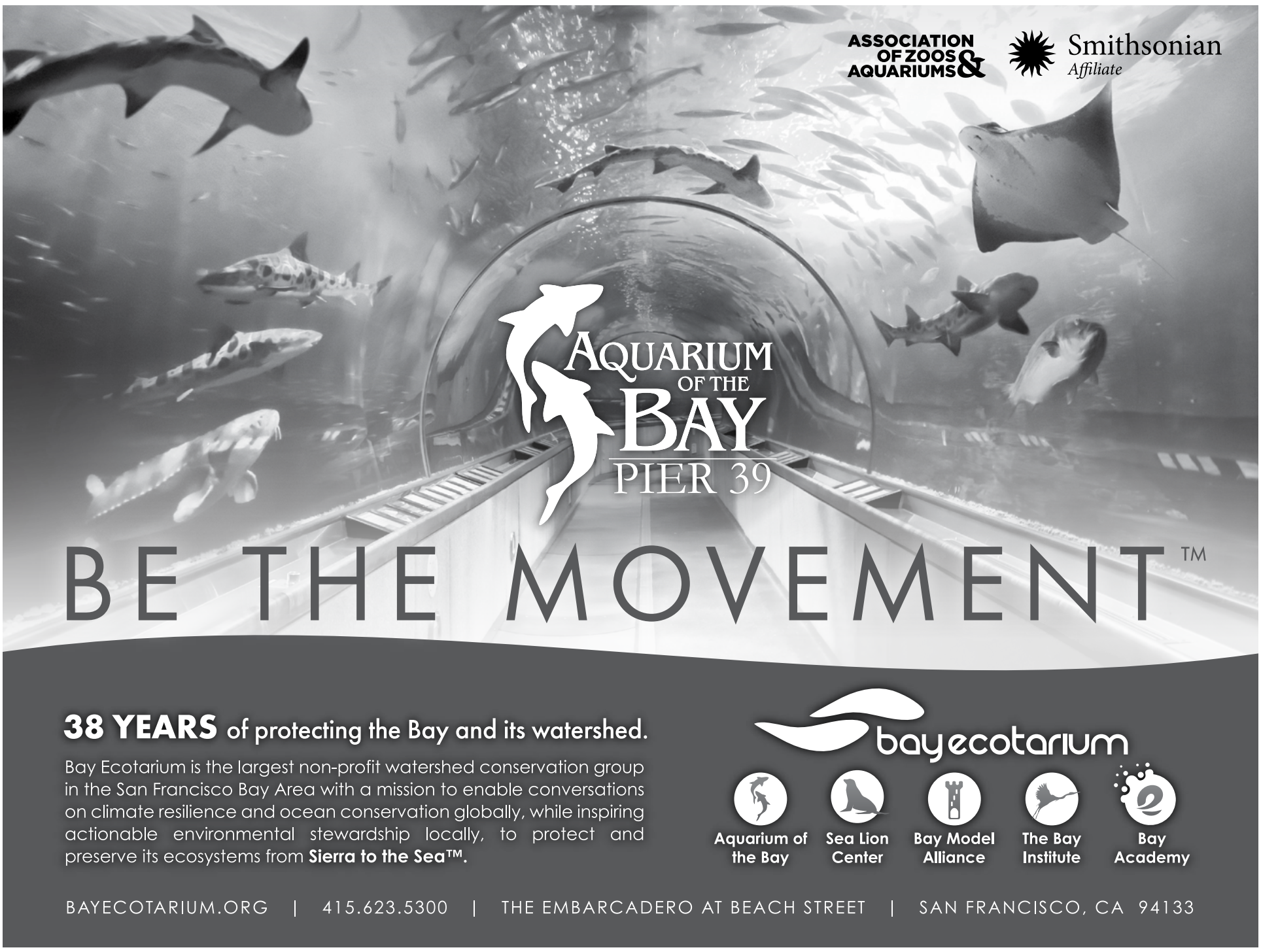
THD testified in opposition to removal. Unfortunately, only one official presided, simply noting comments to be passed along and leaving the impression that this was just a perfunctory event; it certainly didn't help instill confidence that concerns were being heard.

To date there has been substantial neighborhood disappointment in the performance of our public agencies relative to our parks. One hopes that by the publication of the next *Semaphore*, there will be evidence that recent local involvement and oversight have had an impact and that agencies' communication and execution reflect this.

As we went to print, word reached us that DPW has determined to 1) remove the trees and 2) replace them with smaller than the requested size (24" box instead of the desired 36" box). A final tree species has not been selected nor a process to do so identified.

If the trees are to come down, it is more than reasonable that the larger size be installed, given the loss of the pine grove to which DPW played a part. Additionally, assurances are needed that, once the new trees are planted, they receive proper maintenance to avoid the same structural problems that led to the current trees' proposed removal. Once again, local pressure and scrutiny will be needed to achieve a result the park deserves.

Two appeals of DPW's decision have been filed.

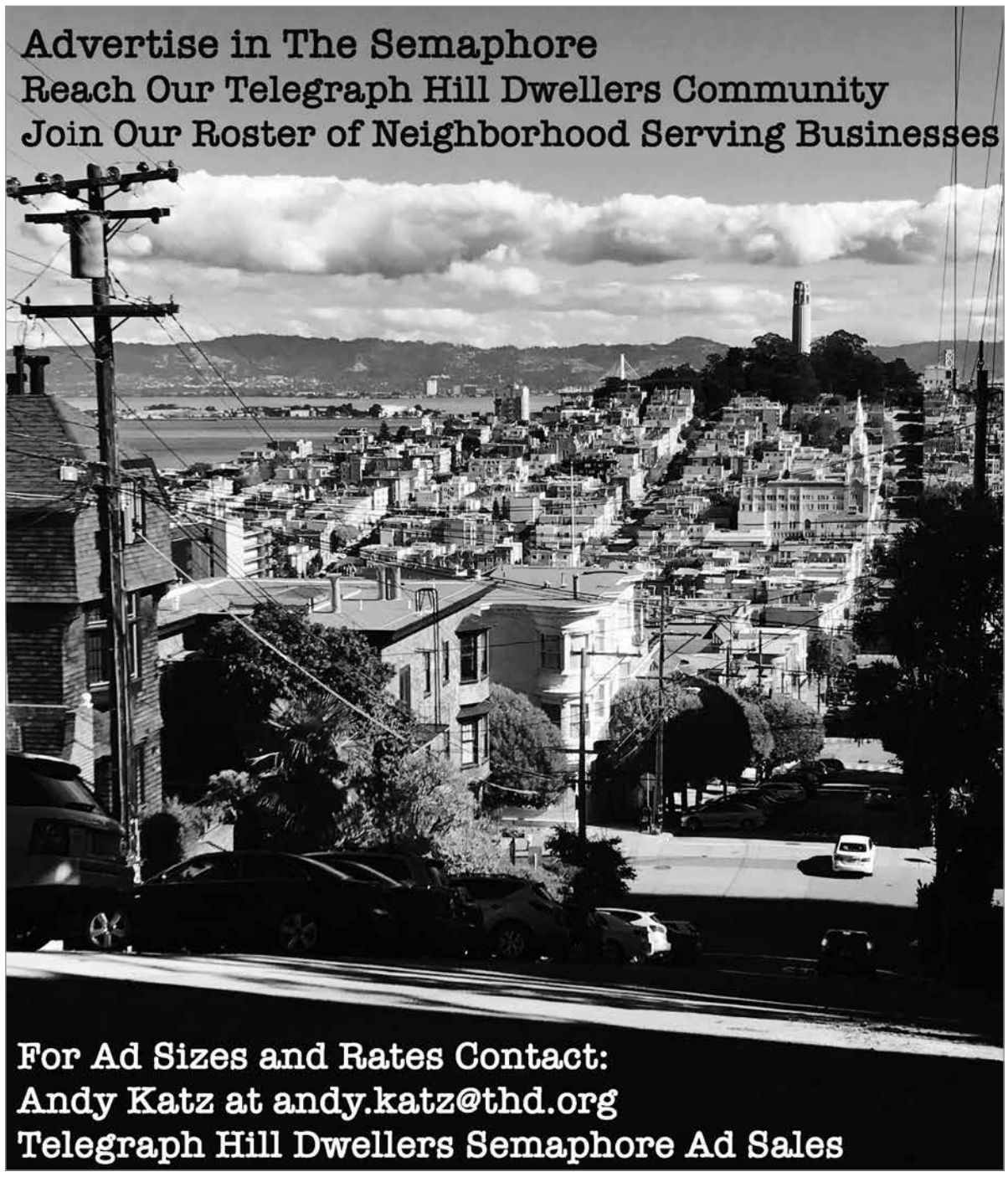


TREASURER'S REPORT

by Nick Ferris
nick.ferris@thd.org

As I wrote previously, THD operates on a fiscal year, running from April 1 to March 31 and budgets for a break-even year. All THD board members and officers are volunteers; they may receive reimbursement for expenses incurred on behalf of THD but not otherwise.

We have been operating on the fiscal year 2018-2019 budget, unanimously approved by the board almost a year ago. As of February 28, 2019, we had a net income of $4,037.65 with just a few large expenses remaining (most notably including the newspaper you're currently reading). This should leave THD with a modest surplus for the year and in good financial standing. The board will soon be entering planning mode, looking to the year ahead and preparing our budget for 2019-2020. If any reader would like to be involved, please reach out to THD!



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al.fontes@thd.org

PLANNING & ZONING COMMITTEE MEETS last Thursdays.
Call for time and location. 986-7070, 563-3494, or 391-5652.

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The Semaphore

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Issue 225 Spring 2019

ARTIFACTS OF THE EARTHQUAKE